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ABSTRACT

To be culturally valid, the characteristics identified by dialectologists as distinctive of black English must correspond to the terms members of the black community use to characterize their speech. Not all of the patterns that characterize black English within the dialectal framework are equal in their social or ethnic significance--the speech pattern that has one meaning for one group of blacks may well have quite another meaning for another black group, and no special social significance for a third. It would be helpful to know what blacks consider negotiable or nonnegotiable language patterns, because such information would not only serve to strengthen theories of black linguistic acculturation but might also contribute to the development of better classroom strategies for teaching standard English. Knowledge of black English characteristics would also help to illuminate issues and concerns relating to black performance within and adaptation to mainstream institutional life. Black culture values spontaneity, improvization, and intuition, and these modes cannot be realized effectively if individuals have no control over how they are to perform a task. To the extent that black culture produces an orientation or style that is not only functional for blacks within the context of their community but also singularly useful to the larger society, it becomes a professional responsibility to keep such modes alive and well. (HOD)

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"Professional Responses to Non-Negotiable Ethnic Markers in Black Language and Culture"

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Black English, as represented in the descriptions of the dialectologists, typically consists of those phonological and grammatical features that are distinctive to (and diagnostic of) black speech, that is, distinctive when compared with the standard or non-standard dialects of English spoken by whites. Several scholars have argued that this dialectal view of Black English is too narrow, ignoring, as it does, those other aspects of black speech behavior that may also be distinctive to blacks, but which cannot be grasped through a lens that is set to receive information essentially relating to rules underlying sentence production and comprehension.

Of course, the reason that the lens is set up the way it is, is precisely <u>because</u> it is a dialectologist's lens, thus, one designed to refract the schemes and configurations that linguists have set to give the speech of a particular social or ethnic group dialect status: it has native speakers; it is rule-governed; and it has its own distinctive origin and pattern of historical development, all of which account for its distinctiveness when compared with the dialects of other groups. However, insofar as the lens aims to refract the schemes and configurations of the dialectologists, it generates an <u>outsider's</u> perspective. And to the extent that these schemes do not fit the <u>insider's</u> view, which is to say, the black <u>cultural</u> view of the structure and function of black speech, it must remain an outside view, reflecting the cognitive structures of dialectologists, but not necessarily those of members of the black community. And until such time as an inside view is found that would correspond in some isomorphic way with the view supplied by dialectologists, Black English cannot claim to have any cultural validity, or, what anthro-

pologists would call, emic status.

The mentioning of all of this is not to suggest that the dialectal view be abandoned--it has its place in the multiple scheme of things--but rather to argue for the need for a study that would begin to establish a black cultural reality for it. Mitchell-Kernan's Language Behavior in an Urban Black Community (1971) is one such study that tried to do this by trying to establish the extent of the fit between the view of black speech that was embodied within terms that members of the black community used to characterize speech (among other things), such as country, flat, good and bad, and the view of Black English (as well as Standard English) offered by dialectologists. She found little or no overlap between the two. Of course, this does not necessarily prove that no black psychological (cultural!) reality underlies the dialectal view. It merely says that the community view of black speech that was expressed through the terms that Mitchell-Kernan chose to examine did not correspond to the patterns that the dialectologists held defined Black English. Nonetheless, it remains to be shown that such a psychological reality does exist for Black English. In its broadest sense, this means that the different patterns that the dialectologists have established to be distinctive of Black English, are distinctive in the minds of members of the black community who habitually use them, insofar as they are not simply differences, but differences that make a difference (mark a speaker in some way). What follows are some impressions that have been informally gathered over the years to assist in the formation of hypotheses that would be helpful in a more systematic approach to such a study.

The first, and perhaps chief, problem to be overcome is the supposition that all of the patterns that the dialectologists claim define Black English have equal symbolic value for members of the

community, which is to say, equal social and/or ethnic significance. Thus, we are led to believe, in the absence of any cultural input from the community, that grammatical patterns such as "It wasn't no girls couldn't go with us," "We been had it," and "He has did it," are equal with regard to each other, and on a par symbolically with the use (or nonuse) of black phonological rules (including, and especially, intonation)--it is amazing how often you hear blacks insist that the meaning of an utterance depends not so much on the literal meaning of the words themselves, as on <u>how</u> you say them-- and/or the use of black idiom.

Yet my own informal observations over the years would say that this is not at all the case. For example, there are clear cooccurrence restrictions governing the use of black idiom, and black phonology, especially intonation. Consequently, those blacks who are communicatively competent in both black and mainstream (institutional) social circles might well find themselves at risk in an informal black social context for failing to use black intonation patterns, just as some blacks are at risk in these same social contexts for not being animated or demonstrative enough in their expressive behavior. Both absences have social and/or ethnic significance insofar as questions are raised as to those individuals' group affiliation or allegiance--they are often accused of being "assimilationist-oriented" or of "acting <u>white</u>"--accusations that reveal that intonation and expressive force among other things, function as signs of blackness for members of the community, and are noticed, that is considered <u>officially</u> absent, in contexts where their presence regularly occurs and is more or less required. However, I have no examples of grammatical variations having the same kind of significance. Thus, whether a black person says "There were three books on the table," or "It was three books on the table," may well be a

difference that makes no difference, either with regard to group identification--it is not a sign of blackness--and not being clearly stigmatized, like ain't or multiple negation, may not even be marked for educational level, and/or (more generally) social class. Nor does it appear that the use of "It was," for "There were" would be used to signify deliberate defiance (often exemplified by a refusal by some blacks to use white or "proper" forms, even when they could). In short, not all of the patterns that characterize Black English within the dialectal framework are equal in their social or ethnic significance. Furthermore, there is no reason to assume that those patterns that are marked, are all marked for the same thing. Nor should we assume that those marked forms have the same social value for all members of the black community. In short, the speech pattern that has one meaning for one group of blacks may well have quite another meaning for another black group, and no special social significance for a third.

The importance of having such information, however, is clear. For example, it would allow us to clarify matters relating to theories of black linguistic acculturation, as well as guide those who are responsible for devising policy or classroom strategies for teaching Black English speakers Standard English, especially those that aim toward the eradication and/or social subordination of Black English patterns.

For example, a present theory of black linguistic acculturation called decreolization, holds that Black English is beginning to resemble Standard English more and more, and conversely, its African or Creole origins, less and less. But as currently proposed, decreolization is presented as if it were a uniform process, affecting all aspects of Black English at once, with equal effect, even though those who are proponents of the theory know this is not the case. Some aspects of

black language are clearly less decreolized than others, like other aspects of black culture, too. Thus, black intonation, non-verbal communication patterns such as "cut-eye" and "suck-teeth," (Rickford and Rickford 197), ways of laughing, as well as the vitality of speech itself (Vass 1979, Harrison 1972) seem to have been far less modified through contact with the dominant white language and culture than has black grammar, thereby constituting generally, a more conservative element within Black English, or black speech. But when I asked Bill Stewart (personal communication) if he had any theories to account for why some Black English forms are less decreolized than others, he said that he did not (See Stewart 1974). Yet, I would propose that those black forms that serve as markers of group affiliation and identification--ethnic markers--are likely to be the more conservative features of a language (or culture), while those features that blacks are likely to associate with "barbarism" and "ignorance" (Stewart 1974), or in modern terms, "country" or "uneducated", are likely to be given up. Thus, Mitchell-Kernan found (1971:148) that the pluralistic emphasis within the black community did include a desire for greater conformity to SE, but that it was selective in the sense that it focused on "grammatical deviation and not ethnic indicators." Thus, the present theory of decreolization could be made more useful to the extent that it became more specific with regards to those language and cultural forms that have social/ethnic or other cultural significance.

Such specificity would also be useful in helping language teachers assess which aspects of their language development programs are likely to be resisted or not. For example, if expressive vitality and intonation are individual and group identity markers for blacks, then any attempt by teachers to change these patterns is likely to meet with

black resistance, and thus, unlikely to succeed. I do not think that the black pronunciation of ask as either [æsk] or [æks], has much social significance for blacks in and of itself. Although, if someone were to try to change someone's aks pronunciation to that of ask, they might meet with some resistance, simply as part of a generally defiant black attitude or reaction to anyone trying to impose "proper" ways of talking on them. But then there ought to be better reasons to change an individual or group speech pattern than whether the individual or group is presently disposed to resist such efforts, or not. Nonetheless, to know what blacks would consider to be negotiable or non-negotiable would help, not only because such information would serve to strengthen theories of black linguistic acculturation, develop better classroom strategies for teaching Standard English, but as this information might help us understand the community's view of black language and culture in the broadest sense (above and beyond those patterns circumscribed by the dialectologist's scheme of things), such as would help to illuminate issues and concerns relating to black performance within and adaptation to mainstream institutional life. And it is here that I would now like to turn.

It is always amusing for me to see the kinds of changes that are going on within the dominant social group, especially within the mainstream corporate sector. The basis for this amusement is that many of the changes that are presently being contemplated by corporate managers, especially those on the cutting edge of things, necessitates moving away from established white mainstream institutional norms towards ways of thinking and doing that, whether they realize it or not, are very much in linewith black cultural norms. Of course, this amusement turns into chagrin at the realization that the same blacks who culturally embody these norms at present, are, in turn, being proselytized to

relinquish them in exchange for the very mainstream cultural patterns that successful corporate managers have now begun to question the value of. To illustrate this, I looked at a very "hot" book being read by corporate managers these days, In Search of Excellence, by Peters and Waterman, and came up with the following passages, based upon the authors' view of what they regard as culturally wrong with some American corporations and culturally right with others. For example, they quote from Ernest Becker, a psychologist, and regard his view as a major supporting one for their theoretical position, one, they claim, ignored by most management analysts (1982:xxiii). They quote Becker as saying that "man is driven by an essential 'dualism'; he needs both to be part of something and to stick it out. He needs at one and the same time to be a conforming member of a winning team and to be a star in his own right."

But this view is more a black cultural view than it is a white one. This is because white culture traditionally has demanded greater conformity of the individual to group norms, that is to say, considerably greater subordination of individuality when individuals are part of a team or group, than black culture has. Thus, whites only became stars in so far as they were proficient in their role and insofar as their role was instrumentally critical to the team's success. But as a white player had only a supporting cast role: useful but not critical to the teams success, that individual had little opportunity to stand out, especially since all players were asked to make only strictly functional moves: those that contributed directly to the basic team task. As one white coach recently put it "There is no letter I in the word team." In short, there was no opportunity to draw public attention to oneself apart from having been given a critically instrumental role.

But in black teams the individual is not expected to subordinate his individuality to the group just because he has been cast in a supporting role (In black culture your public identity is as much or more defined by what you <u>are</u> as what you <u>do</u>, whereas in white mainstream culture your public identity is defined almost entirely by what you do). And blacks are aided in this effort to stand out as an individual by a different concept of functionalism: one which enables performers to make other-than-strictly functional moves, so long as such moves do not interfere with getting the basic task accomplished. This rule allows even supporting cast players to draw public attention to themselves, making moves that serve to stamp them as unique individuals, and, in such way satisfying their needs as individuals to stand out and to be part of a group. In fact, a prototypical black group structure that embodies Becker's view perfectly is the black jazz ensemble, where each member has both a supporting and starring role, thereby functioning as a group member and individual at the same time.

Another problem that Peters and Waterman have cited has to do with the inflexibility that stems from mechanical pictures of organizations that we carry in our heads. They quote from Karl Weick, who, they claim, along with James March, have been prominent among those attacking the "rational" model of business organization. They quote Weick, as follows (p.7):

> Chronic use of the military metaphor leads people repeatedly to overlook a different kind of organization, one that values improvization rather than forecasting, dwells on opportunities rather than constraints, discovers new actions rather than defends past actions, values argument more highly than serenity and encourages doubt and contradiction rather than belief.

Or consider this statement: "Innovative companies are especially adroit at continually responding to a change of any sort in their environment. Unlike Andrew Pettigrew's inertial organizations, when the environment changes, these companies change too." (p.12). Or, how about Texas Instrument's Patrick Haggerty insisting that "those who implement the plans also must make the plans." (p.31).

I can talk for days on how the above notions more nearly fit the black cultural perspective than the presently established white mainstream perspective. But because of time constraints I shall discuss just a few of them here. For example, on the issue of planning and implementation, white structural planning typically works to establish high predictability by reducing the need for individual decision-making at the level of implementation. Planning occurs at one level and implementation at another, often through a highly systematized standard procedure of operations requiring implementers to perform actions in an invariant, repetitive and mechanical way. In reaction to this, blacks are frequently heard to say, "Tell me what to do, but not how to do it," thereby claiming for themselves as implementers, the right to decide how to do things, not only for style considerations, but also for strictly functional ones, too. Those who are closest to the action are often, after all, in a better position to know what adjustments need to be made to ensure success of the task than those far removed from line action. But it is also for other reasons, stylistic ones, that black protest against standard operating procedures. Black culture values spontaneity, improvization and intuition, and these modes cannot be realized effectively if the authorization for how things are to be done is taken from the individual actively engaged in performance of the task.

On other points, blacks are already oriented to see change as the proper order of things, dealing from a perspective of mental reflex, in contrast with white mainstream culture that tends to deal from a posture of mental set (using Paul Carter Harrison's terms), mental set often leading to the institutional inertia that Peters and Waterman criticize many American corporations for. Thus, blacks, through cultural conditioning, are already prepared to respond opportunistically to changing environments, what Albert Murray calls riff flexibility (1971:84ff.) and Harrison (1972:35) moving through changes, which is both a cultural as well as survival mode, a stance or orientation that blacks have put to great use in response to a society in which they have regularly been put through changes. Thus, whether for functional or aesthetic reasons, black culture has oriented its members to behave in ways that are quite compatible with the more innovative patterns and practices of the most successful American companies, more so than established white mainstream culture has prepared its members, who have been socialized to feel comfortable essentially when dealing from a position of mental set.

What lessons are there to be learned from all of this? First of all, it is patently stupid for any group or society to throw anything away that it might have need of later. Furthermore, to the extent that black culture produces an orientation or style that is not only functional for blacks within the context of their community but singularly useful to the larger society, it becomes a professional responsibility not only to keep such modes alive and well for community use but also to be opportunistic in exploiting them for the benefit of the society as a whole. Moreover, it is extremely important that the society find a way to have such modes or perspectives seriously considered when they are already represented by members of the cultural group in which

such modes originate and develop, rather than waiting until such time as these ideas filter up into the white mainstream culture. Not only is this wasteful and inefficient in itself, it usually occurs when there is a crisis, which is not the best time for making decisions of any kind. In short, American society needs to move away from its present structurally pluralistic framework: a situation in which one cultural group dominates all others, to a culturally pluralistic one, in which the various cultures that are part of America can polically exist on a more equal level, and consequently, can have a stronger voice in reaching the whole of America. As George Castile said, the Navahos' view of the harmonious balance necessary with nature seems singularly useful in a society confronted with the outer limits of a world view based upon "unlimited expansion and unlimited good," (1975:38). Yet, up to now, the Navaho view had to wait to receive representation by white middle-class environmentalists for it to receive serious consideration within the larger society. And who can better represent a point of view than those who <u>own</u> it, for whom it often is not simply an orientation, but a commitment, not simply an argument but a philosophy.

Perhaps it is time for the society to consider how it might benefit by ensuring that members from various cultural enclaves within American society mainstream with <u>more</u> of their native traits, values and philosophy intact rather than less. In doing so, the society might well make a moral commitment to the value of variation itself, thereby maximizing its own evolutionary potential, as Castile notes, irrespective of the particular content of any group's perspective at any particular point in time. Taking a lesson from the sorcerer who can make a cup out of a saucer and turn a mop into a broom, but out of nothing can make only nothing, we as professionals need to be working to

keep the plural condition alive and well, so as to provide readier solutions for the problems that plague us. Or we can continue to plod along and muddle through as we have, promoting willy-nilly, a mindless, uncritical, reflex assimilationism, that threatens to destroy the cultural richness within our society, and so deprive us of that which, if properly nurtured and developed, could benefit us all.

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